A Game of Castles

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Princess Peach has been kidnapped and taken to the Koopa Kingdom, but Bowser had nothing to do with it. To avoid a tricky political situation back home, she remains in his castle while they attempt to figure out what happened. As the intrigue deepens, the two rulers find themselves increasingly drawn to one another. BowserxPeach

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A Princess, Imprisoned

When Peach woke up, she was alone in a room with stone walls. The air was stuffy and almost unbearably warm. The last thing she remembered was going to sleep in her own bed in the Mushroom Kingdom. Where she was now, she had not a clue.

Judging by the size of the room, she was probably in a cell of some kind. Her head ached, and she had trouble focusing her eyes. She could only assume she had been drugged. Wincing at the pins and needles in her legs, she got to her feet and stumbled to the door, which had no knob or handle. There was a small window a bit higher than her face, and it was blocked by iron bars showing signs of rust where they joined the cold metal of the door. Peach pushed the door outward and then took hold of the bars and pulled, but it would not move.

She stepped back and looked around the room, which was featureless save for several pipes running across the ceiling. One was significantly larger than the others, and the insulation that cushioned it against the edges of the opening in the upper wall appeared to be rotting.

Peach considered her situation. If she was alive, then whoever had taken her from her castle didn't want her dead. Still, her cell was completely empty, and the only light came through the bars on the doorway. Although Peach could hear a steady rumbling from somewhere far away, there was no other sound except that of her own breathing. She couldn't hear anyone outside the door, and there was no indication that she was being monitored. Even if whoever put her here didn't want her dead, they didn't seem to care if she was alive. In a worst case scenario, they might leave her here until she was starving before acknowledging her existence.

She didn't want to wait that long. If she could remove the loose insulation, she might be able to see past the edges of the large pipe. That would be a start, at least.

The pipe was too high for her to reach. Still, she would have to try. She backed up, took a running start, jumped onto the wall, and used it to spring herself higher. The tips of her fingers just barely grazed the edge of the pipe's insulation. Encouraged, she tried again, and again, and again, until finally, exhausted, she came down awkwardly and scraped one of her knees against a jutting portion of the stone wall, drawing blood. Her body was still weak, and her head spun. The passage of time grew strange.

After an indeterminate span that could have been hours or mere minutes, she finally heard the heavy swing of a door opening. Footsteps echoed outside her cell, drawing closer. Peach's momentary panic was quickly replaced by a decision to feign sleep. It would be useful to know what her captors would say if they thought she wasn't listening.

The footsteps stopped outside of Peach's room. There was no clanking of weapons or armor, but the heavy silence that followed was disconcerting.

"I would think you were sleeping," a voice came from the other side of the door. "But you are breathing heavily, and the blood on your leg is fresh. Stop playing with us, Princess."

The voice was thick and oily, like some sort of viscous liquid being forced through a twisted valve. The vowels were strange, the consonants were sharp, and the tone was not kind. Peach remained as she was.

After a pause, the voice continued.

"I came to let you out, but it looks like you're enjoying your game. As you wish. I'll come back later, but I can't tell you when."

So the voice said, but Peach could not hear anyone actually moving away from the door. She was being threatened, but she was being threatened politely.

Peach opened her eyes and climbed to her feet.

"What do you want?" she asked, summoning as regal a tone as she

could manage.

"I want to take you out of this storage closet and transport you to a place where I can keep an eye on you, and I'd like to do it now."

Peach shot a quick glance at the insulated pipe. It was no use; there was no other way out. She had nothing to lose.

"Well then, let's go," she said, crossing her arms over her chest. "I'm waiting."

Secret Staircase

The door opened. Peach bit her lip, willing herself to remain silent. The Mushroom Kingdom was an open country. Many people passed across its borders, and she had seen koopa before. Some were as tall as her, and some were slightly smaller, though still larger than the toadstool people. Some had skin like hers, and some had scales. Some had teeth, and others had beaks. Some even had wings and could ride clouds of their own making.

Peach had never seen anything like the man standing before her.

He was much larger than the men of her race. His thick hair was an unnatural shade of red, and two evil-looking horns sprouted from his head. His teeth were murderously sharp.

When she looked into his eyes, she became aware that she was being appraised as well.

"I don't know how much trouble you're intending to give us," he said in his strange voice, "but you must understand that there are lives at stake other than your own."

"If you're suggesting that I follow you quietly, I don't see how I have any other choice," she said, gesturing at the retinue standing at attention behind him.

"They are for camouflage, to hide you. They will take you to a safe place, but you must go quickly and make no noise."

"Fine then, after you. I can't very well go anywhere while you're blocking the doorway."

His eyes narrowed in irritation. She met his glare, and he frowned and turned wordlessly.

When she stepped out of the room, Peach was surrounded by a dozen smaller, unhorned koopa. The large one said something to them in their own language, and they nodded assent. He then

addressed Peach.

"They will escort you to my private chambers. It may be some time before I can join you. I expect that you will wait for me."

"And I expect that you won't keep me waiting for any longer than necessary."

The koopa frowned and said something to the others before stalking off down the stone corridor.

"Do you speak Koopa?" one of the guards asked Peach in her language.

Yes, a little, if you speak slowly .

Good. We will surround you on all sides, and we will move quickly. Please say something if you are uncomfortable, but please do so quietly. We do not want to be seen or heard. Do you understand?

Peach nodded, and the koopa nodded back to her. With that, the party set off.

The hallway was made of stone, and pipes of various sizes crossed its ceiling. There were more small rooms along one of the walls, and a few of them reverberated with the sound of machinery. She followed the koopa that had spoken, and the others followed her. They turned at a number of intersections, and Peach, who had been trying to keep track of their progress, soon lost all sense of direction.

She was led to a staircase cut into what seemed to be the rock face of a mountain. It was here that the party finally paused. While the lead koopa consulted with one of the others, Peach took the opportunity to survey her surroundings. Just around a nearby corner was a vast room that radiated light and heat. Peach could hear a jumble of voices approaching from the same direction. Before the speakers came into sight, the koopa began moving up the steps.

The narrow staircase had no alcoves or carpeting or decoration of any kind. It was the sort of passage that would be used by servants. There were several landings that seemed to lead off in other directions, but Peach was moving too quickly to see what lay

beyond them. She kept climbing, wondering how tall this building could possibly be.

Peach had heard that the castle of the koopa king was built not just on top of a mountain, but into the mountain as well. She hoped against hope that she had not found herself in the king's castle, for such a situation would be disastrous. The political climate in her own kingdom had prevented her from leaving, and she realized she had never seen the king in person. The horned man who had come to her cell was impeccably dressed, and he failed to pay deference to her royal status. Could he possibly have been...?

Eventually the lead koopa came to a halt at a landing that seemed to be a dead end. He examined the stone wall intently. After a moment, he pushed a number of smaller stones embedded in a star-shaped pattern, and a section of the wall suddenly sunk back with a gravely grating sound. On the other side was a large and well-appointed room.

The koopa stepped aside and invited her to enter. Without looking back, Peach crossed the threshold.

An Unexpected Ally

We will leave you now, Princess , the koopa said. He bowed and closed the door behind her.

Peach watched the stone wall slide shut and then turned to survey the room. There were no windows, but the glass globes that hung along the edges of the ceiling emitted a soft glow. A rich carpet covered the floor. Bookshelves lined the walls. In the middle of the room was a circle of large chairs, on either side of which were two tables covered in paper and parchment.

Her legs were tired from climbing, and she sank into one of the chairs and closed her eyes. Her head still ached, and she was terribly thirsty. She was wearing only what she had slept in. Since she hadn't caught even the tiniest glimpse of the sky, she had no idea what time it was.

She opened her eyes and scanned the room. There was a small clock on a nearby bookshelf. Sighing, she got to her feet and walked across the floor. After the rough stones of the endless staircase, the plush carpet felt heavenly against her bare feet.

Peach picked up the clock and looked at it. It was still early enough in the morning to be dark outside. Presumably she had been spirited away at some point during the night. Either she had lingered in a drugged sleep for an entire day, or her captors had somehow managed to cross the territories dividing her kingdom and the Koopa Kingdom in record time.

She ran her hands across the spines of the books on the shelf in front of her. Most bore the koopa script, but a few were in her own language. Peach's head swam, and she turned away from the wall of bookshelves and approached the table behind one of the chairs. On top of the heavy parchment were scraps of loose leaf scrawled with writing in a shorthand she couldn't decipher.

"Find anything you like?"

The husky voice startled Peach, and she spun around, clutching the edge of the table for balance.

A female koopa stood in an open doorway on the opposite side of the room. The sides of her head were shaved, and a shock of pink hair sprouted directly above her face. Although she wore the armored clothing favored by the koopa, there was no military courtesy in her manner.

"Who are you?" Peach asked, cautiously.

"A little Birdo told me that we had an unexpected visitor arrive late this evening, but I didn't know I'd have the pleasure of welcoming royalty. What could Bowser have been thinking, I wonder."

The koopa's smile was unkind, and her eyes were hard. She spoke the language of the Mushroom Kingdom fluently and with no accent. As she drew closer, Peach could see that they were roughly the same height. She must be of noble blood herself, then.

"Are you the king's consort?" Peach ventured.

The koopa tossed her head back and laughed.

"Oh no, I'm his cousin. I'm next in line to the throne, though. I have a number of formal titles, but you can call me Wendy."

Peach had received missives from the office of this koopa but had never corresponded with her directly. There had never been any need for her to do so. Wendy Koopa stood at the head of the kingdom's armored land division, and the Mushroom Kingdom had been at peace since before she was born.

"I would prefer to address you by your title, General."

Wendy smirked. "So I should return the favor and address you by *your* title, Princess Dauphine."

Peach flinched. Although she had been at great pains to conceal her tenuous hold on the throne during her reign, this woman seemed to know it was a sore subject for her.

"I thought not. Call me Wendy, and I'll call you Peach."

"That's fine, Wendy, thank you. Now that we've been properly introduced, would you care to enlighten me as to how I've come to have the pleasure of making your acquaintance?"

Wendy narrowed her eyes. "Do you really not know why you're here?"

Peach stared at the koopa, her face a mask carved in ice. Wendy dropped her gaze first.

"In any case, you probably don't want to meet the king dressed like that, if he ever hauls his lazy shanks up here to receive you." Wendy sighed. "You have my apologies for the treatment you've received. Let's get you cleaned up."

"I would appreciate that," Peach said. She could not allow herself to relax, but it seemed as if she had, for the moment, found an ally.

The Smell of Iron

When Peach emerged back into the antechamber, she wore a rose-colored shift. Wendy waved her over to one of the room's couches and was helping her lace her boots when the horned koopa who had released her from her cell burst into the room. His eyes settled on Peach with a look of immense relief, but he seemed to be at a loss for words.

Wendy cleared her throat, and his attention snapped to her.

You! What are you doing here?

Demonstrating the courtesy you lack.

How did you hear about this?

It's my business to know what goes on inside this castle.

Wendy turned to Peach. "This is our king, Bowser. You'll have to forgive him, Peach. What he meant to do was to inquire after your wellbeing, but he didn't, because he's rude," she said, glaring at him.

I DON'T HAVE TIME FOR THIS , he roared. *Wendy, I don't know what sort of situation we have on our hands, but I need you to handle this, now. I want our entire staff decommissioned. I don't care what you do. Call a field day, if you want. Keep all hands busy. Tell everyone a different story. Your cabinet is waiting for you. Get out of here.*

"Someone's in a foul mood. You'd almost think he was in over his head here."

Bowser's eyes flashed. *GET. OUT. NOW.*

Wendy stood and sauntered to the door, deliberately ignoring Bowser. Before she left the room, she turned and said, "See you later, Peach. Don't take any guff from this swine."

Bowser slammed the door after her.

Peach spoke up. "That was a lovely tableau. Did you put on a performance for my sake, or is that how you treat everyone?"

Bowser strode over to Peach, but she remained seated. He regarded her for a moment and then, sighing, collapsed onto the couch with her. The seat jumped under his weight as he fell into it. Beneath his armored regalia, Peach could see that he was exhausted. This aroused no sympathy in her, however, and she declined to speak.

He broke the silence. "Do you really not know why you're here?"

"Are you suggesting that I had something to do with this? That I allowed myself to be kidnapped and confined in your castle?"

"Yes. That's what I'm asking."

Peach fixed a pointed look at Bowser. He opened his mouth but said nothing. He seemed to be searching for the right words. Peach noticed that, unlike many koopa she had met, he had stubble on his jaw. Just as she was physically distinct from her people, so too was he. He rubbed his face with his hand, and she once again noticed his claws, which were longer and less rounded than Wendy's had been.

Bowser rose, saying, "It's been a long night. We have to get you back to your kingdom before anyone finds out you're here. Give me a short time to prepare. Don't move."

"I don't see that you're in a position to give me orders. After all, it's more to your benefit than mine that I stay in this room."

Bowser gritted his teeth, and, for a moment, Peach was overwhelmed by his sheer size. Pointing to a silver-plated carafe, he said, "Have some coffee. You look like you could use it."

Peach rolled up her eyes, stood up, and poured coffee into a cup of treated glass. She drank. It was bitter but tasted vaguely of cinnamon. Its warmth spread to her hands.

Bowser came back into the room. "Come on," he said. "We're leaving."

Peach ignored him and took another sip. He waited until she was done.

Bower ushered Peach to the end of a short corridor leading away from the main hallway outside his chambers. There was an elevator waiting for them. It was a haphazard affair, not much more than a metal platform suspended in a rock shaft. The gears, wires, and pulleys were all visible. When Bowser pushed the lever, steam hissed out of the device. A jet of vapor struck his leg, but he didn't seem to notice.

The platform lurched downward. Peach lost her balance, but there was nothing to grasp onto. Bowser caught her arm and held her until she had regained her footing.

"Where are you taking me?" Peach asked.

"We have to take you back," he answered.

"Back where?"

"Back to where you came from."

Suddenly the rock face of the elevator tunnel fell away, and a blast of hot air hit Peach in the face. Beyond a screen of wire mesh encircling a skeleton of iron scaffolding was a vast open space. The glow of lava rose from a natural basin at its bottom.

"This is no place for you," he said.

Museum of Unnatural History

Luigi took a drag on his cigarette.

"Someone needs to rescue the princess," they said, and off went his brother like a hawk whose hood had been loosed. Not that Luigi knew anything about hawks, which were just as real to him as unicorns and dragons – and princesses, for that matter.

His parents had never had enough time for their sons to go with them to Central Park, and their school district had been too poor for field trips, but Luigi had once taken a girl to the Museum of Natural History. He had been as stunned by the scale of the architecture as he had by the towering dinosaur bones, all the while failing to notice how distant his date was becoming. On the subway ride home, she had gotten off a few stops early, and like a fool he had let her go. They saw each other a few times at the corner store after that, bobbing their heads like pigeons to avoid making eye contact.

Love is a chemical response designed by eons of evolution to ensure the reproduction of the species. There's no magic to it, and a missed connection or two – or a dozen – are only to be expected. Luigi tossed his half-smoked cigarette into the grass.

This world was too perfect, he reflected. Pastoral even, like something from a library book, except without the mildewed corners. No wonder Mario went running into the countryside, eager for adventure. The man had no sense of restraint, and he would probably end up causing some sort of diplomatic crisis, if such things even existed in a place like this. Unfortunately, Luigi had a sneaking suspicion that they did.

The Mushroom Kingdom was nothing if not pleasant, but something terrible had obviously happened here. Piles of brick and rubble were scattered across the landscape, and enormous pipes stretched down to who even knows where. The hungrily clinging vines, the sluggishly lumbering beasts, the curiously domed hills in the distance – it was all uncanny. The worst were the pits, which

seemed to be bottomless. If you accidentally tripped into one of those things, how long would you fall? Would you plummet endlessly into the darkness, or would your death rise up to meet you like a mercy?

Luigi lit another cigarette. Like everything here, they were too bright, too colorful, neatly hand-rolled and sweetly fragrant, with no need for a filter. Was the smoke he pulled into his lungs even harmful? Back home, men on television had argued over whether cigarettes cause cancer. It wasn't even a question, Luigi thought, but it didn't matter – everyone dies in the end.

Was he dead? He didn't feel dead. Nothing about this world felt dead.

He was here because of his brother. Mario had a habit of landing himself in strange situations, which was how he had become a cocaine mule, running loads from Newark to Boston. Ostensibly they were plumbers, the Mario Bros. The company was named, like his brother, after a man from Atlantic City whom Luigi had never met, although Mario used to keep a picture of himself shaking hands with his namesake in his wallet. They were two of a kind, short but handsome, smiling and charming, both up to their chins in dirty money.

Mario thought he was Rocky Balboa, some kind of hero, a local kid who would one day do good. There wasn't much good to be done around 86th Street, however, and a career that started with street brawls turned into gray market guns and went downhill from there. Luigi gave up his dreams of college and took a few courses on bookkeeping at the community center, scratching notes with a cheap pen onto cheap paper while trying to ignore the smell of urine. He had always cleaned up his brother's messes, and so when the Russians from Brighton Beach came after them, it was Luigi who suggested they make a run for it through the sewers. They were plumbers, after all.

How could he have known they would end up in a place like this?

Luigi kicked a pile of cement blocks lying across his path and was surprised when they crumbled. He saw something sparkling

underneath the dust, so he knelt to get a better look. Through the dirt came the gleam of gold.

Luigi picked up a coin and turned it in his hand. Its scratched surface caught the sun, shining as brightly as tin foil. A find like this would make him rich back home, but it was all but meaningless here. He considered taking the coin with him as a souvenir, but there was no point. He had no way of getting home, and no guarantee that he would still have a home even if he managed to find his way back.

At least he still had Mario. Mario had gone to chase after the princess, and, as always, he would chase after Mario.

The Hidden Armada

The elevator came to a shuddering halt at the end of its long descent. Bowser pushed aside the grating enclosing the shaft, which rose in a dark tunnel above them.

"After you," he said, making an impatient gesture.

Peach stepped off the platform. The floor under her boots was smooth concrete, but she couldn't see far into the room beyond the glare thrown by a red lamp above the elevator.

"You might want to cover your eyes," Bowser remarked from behind her, and suddenly the room exploded with light as dozens of electric torches flared to life.

Arranged within the enormous cavern was a magnificent fleet of airships. Peach stared as her eyes adjusted to the brightness. The scene in front of her was a violation of any number of treaties between their two kingdoms, which set clear quotas for military craft.

"How long has all this been here?" she asked, not even trying to keep her voice neutral.

Bowser, who was fiddling with wires emerging from a wall panel covered in circuit breakers, grunted in response. He frowned in concentration. The look on his face didn't inspire confidence. Peach rubbed her temples and sighed.

"I don't know what sort of war you're trying to start with this armada, but I promise you'll have it if you fly one of these ships into Mushroom Kingdom airspace."

Bowser spun around. "Then how do you suggest we get into the Mushroom Kingdom?"

"We're not flying."

"I don't have time to go with you by land."

"Who said I want you to accompany me?"

Bowser scowled. "In case you haven't noticed, Princess, we're in a tricky situation here. If I don't bring you back myself, how will you justify your absence?"

Peach couldn't believe how obtuse he was being. "How exactly does your presence solve the problem? No one needs to know I was ever here."

He threw up his hands. "FINE. You can just go back on your own, then. We'll pretend this never happened. That's obviously the best solution."

"Are you even listening to yourself? What kind of king are you, anyway?"

Bowser opened his mouth to reply, but his words were cut off by a rush of sound as an elderly koopa appeared in the air between them. He floated to the ground and adjusted his glasses as Peach stared at him. Magic of the sort he had just performed was not unheard of, but it was exceedingly rare.

"Excellent!" he exclaimed. "Your Majesty, I'm relieved I was able to catch you before you departed. I came to request that the princess remain here with us as our guest for a bit longer. I'm concerned for her safety, you see."

"My safety?"

"Quite right, Your Highness. I've received intelligence that you may have been brought here by an agitator in your own kingdom."

"That's impossible," she said. She didn't add that her people possessed neither the magic nor the technology to cover the distance to the Koopa Kingdom so quickly.

"Regardless," the koopa continued apologetically, "I respectfully submit that we formally notify your kingdom that you are here as our guest."

Peach considered his proposal. Such a statement would create an

illusion that she had acted of her own agency without consulting her ministers, which was well within her sovereign right. It would also prevent the incursion of any warships across the border.

"With all due respect, sir," she asked, "who are you, and what stake do you have in the matter?"

"Ah, how rude of me." The koopa tipped the brim of his pointed hat. "I am Kamek, advisor to King Bowser. My fondest desire is that both of you emerge from this situation unharmed and without any undue political complications."

Peach nodded. "Then our interests are in alignment. I can explain that I was invited here for some event – a party, let's say – and that my transportation was arranged by your staff, who did not wish to create any unnecessary hassle for the Mushroom Kingdom."

Bowser had apparently arrived at the same conclusion. "That might be a good idea," he said.

"So be it." Peach clapped her hands, signaling an end to the discussion. "I'll draft the message myself, if you'll provide me with the means to write it."

Kamek smiled. "Thank you for understanding. If you would permit me to be so bold, might I suggest a tour of our kingdom while we orchestrate a suitable event? It would be wise for you to keep moving until we're certain it's safe to bring you back to the castle. I'm sure His Majesty would be honored to escort you."

"Don't make assumptions, Kamek," Bowser growled.

Peach glared at him before returning her attention to his advisor. "Perhaps it could be arranged that I spend a day or two in another castle," she offered.

"An excellent suggestion," Kamek bowed his head in assent. "Your Highness has not yet had the pleasure of riding the newest model of our pneumatic airships. I assure you, it's quite an experience."

"All right." Bowser shook his head. "We'll fly. Assuming that's acceptable to you, Princess." He looked as if he did not relish the

prospect any more than she did.

"Of course," Peach said, smiling sweetly. Her eyes were as hard as diamonds. "It would be my pleasure."

A View from the Sky

They sped across the land at low altitude. Peach had been a passenger on some of the finest zeppelins in her kingdom or any other, but this craft was newly built and featured the latest in modern technology. There was only one small issue – or rather, a very large issue – that gave her cause for concern.

"I say," she asked the pilot, "does this ship have to have so many cannons?"

The pilot, a gray-skinned man with slicked-back black hair so gelled that it looked like a helmet, laughed.

"Of course it does! All the better to shoot things with, my dear. That's why they call me Bullet Bill."

"And what," Peach continued, flashing a sharp glance at Bowser, "would you need to shoot?"

Bowser returned her glare, his arms crossed over his chest. "The munitions are for show," he said. "It's good to let my kingdom know I have big guns."

"And who, precisely, is going to see these guns as they fly through the air?"

Bowser bared his teeth at her in a sneer. "Aren't you just full of questions, Princess?"

"If I'm to be taken on a tour of your kingdom, I think I have a right to comment on what I see," she retorted.

"The boss is just putting on a show for you, Your Highness," the pilot interjected. "There was no need to travel in this particular craft. He could have gone with something much smaller."

"I'll have no more of your impertinence," Bowser snapped.

Bullet Bill laughed. "Not that I blame him, of course. It's hard to resist playing with toys like this. There's nothing better in this world than to sail a streamlined state-of-the-art airship through the open skies, and canons only add to the pleasure. Just the other day we launched a few hot-air balloons for target practice – "

"It was a preliminary systems check," Bowser grumbled.

"There's no need to be modest!" Bullet Bill turned to Peach. "The boss is a great shot, why he – "

"SHUT YOUR INFERNAL MOUTH OR I WILL SHOOT YOU FROM A CANNON MYSELF."

Peach coughed lightly. "Perhaps you could decrease the speed," she said. "I'd like to go out on deck."

Without any of the grinding of gears that characterized the airships Peach was familiar with, the rush of the wind outside the cockpit fell to a brisk breeze. Peach pressed the button that released the latch on the door, which was fashioned out of a single plate of glass run through with fine brass wires shaped into marvelous patterns. It was a folly she would not have expected to see on a warship.

The glass slid open in a puff of steam, and Peach stepped out onto the polished wooden floorboards of the deck. She walked over to the railing, which was just as ornamented as the rest of the ship. The koopa were well known for their craftsmanship. She supposed that she shouldn't be so surprised by these small touches.

She crossed her arms and waited as Bowser clomped over to stand beside her. He did not seem to be capable of moving quietly.

"Do you at least like the ship?" he asked.

Peach hadn't expected this question. "What?"

"DO YOU, AT LEAST, LIKE – "

"No, no, I heard you." Peach waved him away. "The ship is a marvel, but you must forgive me for failing to appreciate it. Its existence comes as something of a shock."

Bowser exhaled impatiently and leaned on the railing, gesturing out over the ground below.

"Look down and tell me what you see," he said. "There's nothing there. Nothing."

"I wouldn't say that," Peach responded, but the landscape was fairly bleak. Instead of the green fields and sloping hills of her own territory, the lands of the Koopa Kingdom were harsh and covered in rocks and sand and volcanic heat vents.

"That's just because you were trained to be polite," Bowser retorted. "We've got mineral and oil deposits, but most are underground, and what's on top of them isn't pretty. We do what we can, but we still have to trade for most of our food."

"I know that," Peach snapped. "Tell me what this has to do with you having an armada."

"Well," Bowser rubbed the back of his neck, "it's a convenient way to travel, and..."

"And?"

"And each province in the kingdom has its own ruler. They're all related to me, which makes all of them candidates for succession to my throne. Wendy says she has no interest in that sort of thing, and I trust her, but some of the people in our family would be more than happy to see me dead."

Peach didn't respond. She had her own troubles. That's not something the king of the koopas needed to know, but the fact that he would confess his difficulties made her feel slightly more sympathetic toward him.

Bowser tapped his claws on the railing. "So I sometimes take the Royal Koopa Air Force out on parades, so people can see the airships."

"And you shoot things."

"And I shoot things."

"Is it fun?"

"Is it fun...?" Bowser looked incredulous. "Of course it's fun!"

Peach grinned. "Then I'd like to see a demonstration."

Another Castle

Outside the walls of the greenhouse, flecks of ash fell softly onto cracked red earth. The inside, which was heated by the waters of an underground hot spring, was almost tropical. Peach took a deep breath of the humid air, which reminded her of her home in the Mushroom Kingdom.

How could this only be her second morning in the Koopa Kingdom? She felt like it had been much longer.

Bowser's irascibility wasn't helping.

Although he had enjoyed himself yesterday afternoon on his airship, his mood had turned sour as soon as they docked outside of the northernmost castle in the kingdom. The castle's master had not emerged to greet them, and so Bowser had overseen their arrival himself, bossing everyone around like he owned the place.

Many of the koopa here had small wings, and instead of walking they had an elliptical skipping gait, hovering slightly between strides. For whatever reason this seemed to annoy Bowser to no end. He had raised his voice and been more forceful than necessary, but the koopa ignored him, focusing their attention on her instead. Peach wondered if the lord of the castle was so eccentric that Bowser's bad behavior didn't even register.

The interior of the castle was an architectural riot, with various stylistic flourishes crammed into an enormous open entryway. Balconies and parapets emerged from the walls, single platforms connected by arched bridges were supported by freestanding columns, and spiraling staircases led to nowhere. The space was lit with a jumble of fixtures, from gaslight globes to electric chandeliers.

Peach rubbed her temple as she took it all in.

"Ludwig has strange hobbies," Bowser muttered.

Bowser had seen to it that she was escorted to a suite of rooms

immediately. His blunt demands and apparent inability to wait for anything made her feel sorry for the castle staff, but Peach appreciated his attitude nonetheless; she was exhausted.

The bedroom Peach found herself in was just as fanciful as the rest of the castle. A white plush carpet was spread over the stone floor. Against the far wall was a large bed partially canopied by a gauzy white fabric embroidered with golden vines. The headboard had been carved into an explosion of roses. A delicate settee, also upholstered in white, stood on lions-foot legs, matching the style of the bone-colored side tables, which bore clear glass vases full of white flowers. On the walls of the antechamber hung tapestries depicting damsels with the heads of richly plumed dinosaurs resting in their laps.

Peach was amused. She supposed she had done the master of this castle a favor by occupying the suite, which needed nothing except the presence of a real princess to complete its aesthetic.

She had wondered where the cut flowers had come from, but her question was answered the next morning after she had been led by a lavender-shelled koopa to the large greenhouse attached to the south side of the castle, where she was served lemon-infused water and scones with clotted cream. The contrast between the fragrant warmth on the inside of the glass structure and the barren landscape outside its walls could not be more stark. Peach turned her back on the naked red earth and shifted her chair to face a broad-leafed fig tree whose branching trunk had been artfully trained to twist around itself.

She stood when she saw a young man enter through a passage to another section of the greenhouse. His bright blue hair flowed around his finely boned face. Trailing behind him were the flaps of an outlandish belted dressing gown.

"Good morning, Your Highness," he greeted her, extending his hand. Peach took it, and he bowed with a flourish before kissing her fingers.

"I am Ludwig, the ruler of the Twin Bridges province. I regret that the king was not able to introduce us, but he has never been a morning

person, and I think we can both agree that it's wise not to disturb him before he rises. I trust your stay has been pleasant so far? We get so few visitors here, and I can't tell you how delighted I am to have you as my guest."

His speech was slightly accented, but Peach was charmed by the easy fluency with which he addressed her. A winged koopa brought them a pot of tea, and Ludwig thanked her graciously. The tea was lightly brewed and tasted of sweet jasmine. For the first time since she had been kidnapped, Peach felt comfortable, and she asked her host about the architectural follies in his castle. He took up the subject with a wry grin, explaining that, out here on the fringes of the Koopa Kingdom, he had been left to his own devices. Since the hot springs common to the region aided the development of greenhouses, his province was largely self-sufficient, and he preferred the freedom of his relative solitude.

Ludwig seemed to be on the verge of saying something more when a sudden crash rattled the glass panes of the dividing wall.

"It's too damn wet in here," Bowser complained as he swatted aside a few hanging vines.

He deposited himself into one of the chairs at their small table and glared at Ludwig, looking for all the world like a cat that had joined a party of mice. Peach and Ludwig watched as he poured tea into a cup whose thin handle he struggled to hold with his thick fingers. He took a sip and, apparently finding it distasteful, set the cup back down into the saucer with a loud clank.

"This water tastes like flowers," he announced. "Somebody find me some coffee!" he called out into the greenhouse.

"My dear cousin – " Ludwig began.

"I'm not your 'dear' anything."

"Perhaps you could restrain your temper as a courtesy to Her Highness."

A silver carafe of coffee appeared, and Peach and Ludwig

exchanged a look as Bowser extracted a vial of fire flower juice from his pocket and tipped it into his cup.

Ludwig sighed and steepled his claws in front of his face.

"Now that we're all present and account for," he said, "I think it's time we discussed our respective kingdoms."

On the Road

The wind whipped through Peach's hair as she sped the car down the road. As in her own kingdom, the old highways that ran across the land were cracked and pitted, and it was rare to find a stretch that was so well preserved.

Bowser had known of its existence, which is why he had left several land vehicles in Ludwig's care. It was unclear who had painted the chassis of this car such a garish shade of purple, but all Peach had cared about was being able to drive it.

Ludwig had told her that Bowser loved to race. She did as well, and it was unlikely that another opportunity to drive as she wished would present itself in the near future. At first Bowser had been concerned that she might not be able to handle the large car; but, after Peach proved herself a capable driver, he seemed to relax, leaning back in his seat and propping his boots on the dashboard. Out of the corner of her eye, Peach saw him light a cigarette without a match. The royalty of the Mushroom Kingdom could use magic, so it stood to reason that the sovereign of the Koopa Kingdom could as well.

After he finished the first cigarette, he lit a second, and then a third. Peach noticed that they were of a make that was produced in her own kingdom. She had enjoyed a few herself in private, but the notion that she was not supposed to indulge in the vices of her subjects was so strongly ingrained in her that she couldn't help chastising him.

"You probably shouldn't have too many of those. They'll make you sick."

"I eat fire. I breathe smoke. This is nothing. Don't try anything fancy, and I'll be fine."

"Don't try anything fancy? You mean like this?"

Peach jerked the wheel, flinging the car to the side as the tires skidded along the rough pavement. She considered pressing the

clutch and the brake and drifting into a hard turn, but she wasn't familiar with the vehicle and didn't know how the engine would react. If something went wrong, they would be stranded, and there was nothing for miles on end.

Bowser laughed and kicked the dashboard. "That's what I'm talking about!" he cheered.

Peach smiled. Bowser had been in a much better mood after they left the Twin Bridges castle. He didn't seem to dislike Ludwig. In fact, he trusted him enough to bring the situation under his scrutiny, although Ludwig's piercing questions clearly made him uncomfortable.

Ludwig had grilled her too, and she quickly came to realize that he was far from the eccentric recluse that she had first thought him to be. Bowser had listened just as intently to Peach's answers as Ludwig, but in the end neither of them had been able to draw a conclusion concerning why she might have been kidnapped. Nevertheless, Ludwig suggested that they visit the castle of the forested province to the east, which bordered on Sarasaland, the kingdom ruled by Peach's cousin Daisy.

"What's Ludwig's deal, anyway?" Peach asked.

"He's a weirdo," Bowser answered, lighting his fourth cigarette.

"You know what I mean."

"You mean, why does someone as smart as him live all the way out in the middle of nowhere."

"Right."

Bowser took a deep drag and then exhaled a plume of smoke over his shoulder. "He's brilliant, but he doesn't like other people. He prefers to hole himself up in that castle of his, making the place even more bizarre than it was when he inherited it. His father was a strange one too, and quite deranged. He wanted to keep Ludwig from studying botany, but thankfully he never got his way. The Twin Bridges province boasts our highest domestic output of vegetables

and other plant-based material, and the guy could probably leverage that against me if he wanted to."

"Why doesn't he want to?"

"I told you, he doesn't like people. Me and Wendy handle the business side of things for him, and he gets to plant trees and decorate his castle. He also writes music. He kept me up all night last night making me listen to his latest symphony. I don't get it, but I guess he's got talent. He's one of those people who'll probably be famous after he dies, but we'll never know, because he'll outlive us all."

"Like he outlived his father?"

"He poisoned his father. When I saw him serving you tea I thought I'd have to kill him then and there, but he seems to like you. If you can't go home, you could probably spend the rest of my life with him, and no one would be the wiser."

"Did you just say 'my life'?"

Bowser looked off to the side, where the slopes of low hills rose in the hazy distance like a line drawn across the sky. "If someone kills me, that's the end for everyone. This isn't a nice place, Peach."

Ludwig had suggested as much. Peach had been taught that Bowser's father had come to power after a long and bloody struggle before eventually being assassinated, but she hadn't known the half of it. Some of the plots to which Bowser had casually referred in response to Ludwig's questions had shocked her. It was best not to dwell on the details. The history of his kingdom made her own seem almost idyllic in comparison.

Peach was starting to develop her own ideas about what had happened to her, but she still needed more information and more time to think. As she drove toward the forest, she saw the first tree rising from the rubble that lined the sides of the road in front of her.

The Hills Have Eyes

Luigi stared at the ruined castle. It was like a window into the abyss.

At what point does death occur? Is it when our brains shut down and sensation ceases? If so, Luigi figured, then he had been dead a long time, for the wreckage before him provoked no emotional response.

The structure was like something out of a movie, with towers and turrets. The rest of the architectural elements surely had names, but he had never learned them. The basic principles of accounting, those he knew. Consistency, liability, disclosure – the words swam through his mind as he watched the flames rising from the moat.

Judging from the frenzied footprints in the mud to either side of the road leading to its drawbridge, the castle had been occupied. It hadn't rained in days, and Luigi didn't want to think about why there was mud on the ground. He also didn't care to speculate on what might be burning in the moat. The rising smoke was disturbingly fragrant.

For the past day Luigi had seen nothing except foundations laid bare before the elements and concrete stairs leading down into the damp and labyrinthine underworld. There were fewer trees here, and no fields. Desolation stretched to the horizon, which was broken by the slumped hills in the distance.

The burning castle was proof that it had still been possible to carve out a space for life in this world – and then someone had come along and destroyed it. Truly hope is the worst of all evils.

The Mushroom Kingdom was not nearly so bleak. When he and Mario had emerged from the mouth of a drainage tunnel, filthy and blinking in the light, they attracted the attention of two farmers passing by in a cart full of turnips. The cart had been drawn by a creature that seemed to be a dinosaur, but this was somehow less strange than the people themselves, who had smooth tan skin and heads topped with gilled mushroom caps. Luigi had been repulsed, but Mario had taken their appearance in stride. To Luigi's surprise,

the farmers spoke a queerly accented version of English – but, he supposed, so too did he and Mario.

The two farmers seemed to think Luigi and his brother were princes and offered to take them to the castle. Neither he nor Mario had objected. Mario elbowed him in the ribs, saying, "Looks like we're finally getting the respect we deserve, bro."

On the road to their destination, more mushroom people came out of their curiously shaped houses to wave to them. Some offered food, fresh bread and plump grapes and savory tarts and sparkling cider. He and his brother ate and drank everything that was handed to them. Their life in Brooklyn could be measured in slices of processed cheese and half-spoiled deli meat, and they had never known such luxury. If this was a dream, they might as well enjoy it.

If they were dead, so much the better. Life is suffering, but so far they seemed to be doing okay here, wherever "here" was.

The dinosaur drew the farmers' cart to the gate of a castle made entirely of white marble. They were escorted past the wall and into a courtyard, where a blonde woman in a stunning pink gown was waiting for them. She introduced herself as Peach Toadstool, and Luigi quickly understood two things: she was human, and Mario wanted her.

They were invited to stay in the castle. With nothing else to do, they accepted.

His brother's flirtation with the princess was almost painful to watch. Luigi was grateful for Mario's aggressive pursuit, however, since it gave him a chance to talk to people without having to worry about being interrupted. He slowly took stock of the Mushroom Kingdom, which gradually came to feel like less of a fantasy. Mario refused to believe that any of this was real, and he acted accordingly. Because they were human like the princess, they were treated like royalty, and Mario's excesses were taken for granted.

The Mushroom Kingdom was wealthy, and its people were kind, and Luigi suspected that he and Mario might have been able to extend their stay in the castle indefinitely had not the princess been

abducted.

Toadsworth, the head of the princess's cabinet, was quick to blame the neighboring Koopa Kingdom. Its people were violent and lazy, he said. They refused to do any work for themselves because they were too busy killing each other. They were dangerous, and vicious, and hardly better than animals. Luigi barely listened during the council meeting. He had heard this sort of rhetoric before; their deadbeat father used to say the same thing about Queens.

Mario had volunteered to go out after the princess, proclaiming it as his duty. The mushroom people agreed immediately. Luigi suspected they were glad to be rid of him. Then a letter came from the princess, saying that she was a guest of the koopa king, and so Luigi set out after Mario to prevent him from doing anything stupid.

Perhaps he had been the stupid one for leaving. If Mario was capable of destroying an entire castle – for no one else could have done this – then what ability did he possess to stop him? Luigi had always considered himself the sensible and rational one, but it was entirely possible that he was nothing more than a shadow cast by the sun of his brother's boundless energy. He was incapable of acting on his own; he could only react.

Luigi lit a cigarette and stared at the hills in the distance. He had been watching them as he walked, and it sometimes seemed as if they were watching him too. They could not possibly be natural. Were they buildings? Watchtowers? Or perhaps silos? What did they contain, and why hadn't they fallen to ruin like everything else outside of the circle of Princess Peach's castle?

"Hey."

Luigi spun around, nearly choking on cigarette smoke. A young woman with dark skin and auburn hair had appeared behind him. She was wearing a bright yellow jumpsuit with orange detailing. A red hibiscus flower ornamented her heart-shaped face.

"Toadsworth told me Peach has been spirited away to the Koopa Kingdom, and that some sociopath went off after her."

She pointed at the castle. "Please tell me you didn't do this."

Luigi was so shocked by her sudden appearance that the truth tumbled out of his mouth. "No, the sociopath is my brother Mario. My name is Luigi, and I'm trying to find him before he does anything else."

The woman nodded. "Peach told me about you. I'm her cousin Daisy. It looks like we're on the same side, for now. If you try to pull anything crazy on me, it will be the last thing you ever do."

Daisy fixed a level gaze on him and then began walking away. He followed along after her without question. If this ended up being the strangest thing that happened to him today, he would consider himself lucky.

Treetop Castle

The forest castle was a sight to behold, but Peach was more impressed by the piles of moss-covered junk rising between the trees lining the road. Aside from the former missile towers, which were covered in lichens and crabgrass, vegetation usually wouldn't touch the remains of the old kingdoms. The forest on the border with Sarasaland had proven stronger than the toxins leaching out of the metal, however, and its trees grew high enough to form a canopy that threatened to blot out the sky.

Instead of laying its foundation in the earth, this province's castle was perched on thick columns that placed it among the forest branches. The structure seemed to be spread across several connected bases, but the trees were so dense that Peach couldn't tell how far it extended. She slowed the car to a halt, wondering how they would be able to climb up.

Bowser was fast asleep in the seat beside her. At the sound of a whirring motor, he snapped awake. He stretched his arms over his head and then jumped out of the car without bothering to open the door.

"Roy!" he shouted to the pilot of the approaching aircraft, a small platform held aloft by several propellers.

Roy, a koopa wearing a bright purple jacket and red-rimmed wind goggles pulled up over a pink bandanna, brought the craft down so that it hovered three feet or so from the ground, and two koopas jumped down. Both bowed their heads slightly to Bowser, and then one approached Peach.

"I'll take the vehicle from here, Your Highness," she said with a heavy borderland accent. Peach nodded, and the koopa opened the car door for her, offering her hand to help Peach stand. The koopa slid behind the wheel, and the other let himself into the backseat, wielding a small bazooka.

"It's to ward off spiders," Bowser explained, seeing Peach's

confused look. "They grow big around here. They're harmless, of course, but the last thing you want is web on your leather."

Roy waved to them from on top of the floating platform. "Come on up!" he yelled over the noise of the propellers.

Peach walked around the car toward the platform. She looked up at it, and then at Bowser.

He shrugged. "Do you mind if I pick you up?" he asked her.

A jump like this was not a problem for Peach, but she was sore from driving all day.

"Fine," she exhaled, and he put his hands around her waist and lifted her before leaping up himself. Roy grinned at her, saluted Bowser, and then threw a lever that rose the craft into the air. They couldn't talk over the sound of the engine, but Roy tapped Peach on the shoulder and pointed toward an open balcony emerging from the face of the castle.

They drifted right up to a low balustrade railing, where another pair of koopas was waiting take control of the aircraft. Roy jumped down, causing the platform to jerk upwards. Bowser caught Peach as she stumbled and then helped her down onto the balcony. Roy gestured to a table surrounded by wicker chairs, which were being held down against the propeller-generated wind by several koopas. Bowser jumped down onto the balcony after Peach. As the aircraft flew away, one of the koopas held a chair out for Peach. She sat down and gave a sigh of relief as Roy's castle staff brought out tea.

"Princess Peach," Roy said, smiling as he sat across from her. "It's an honor to finally meet you in person. I hope you had no trouble on your way here."

"And I hope you remembered the coffee," Bowser grumbled.

"Of course," Roy nodded, signaling to a member of his staff, who brought over a steaming earthenware cup that looked huge on its tray but was just the right size in Bowser's hands. Roy, who had shrugged out of his jacket and now sat bare-armed in a pale

lavender muscle shirt, was almost as large as Bowser but seemed infinitely more relaxed. The twang of his accent rolled off his tongue, reminding Peach of her cousin, who spoke with similar inflections. She took a sip of tea and wondered what Daisy thought of this strange state of affairs.

"I hate to start off your visit like this," Roy said, "but I have some unpleasant news."

Peach looked at him over the rim of her cup, and Bowser slammed his fist onto the arm of his chair. "Aw, hell," he cursed. "What is it this time?"

"One of the castles to the south has been ransacked."

Bowser was so startled that he spilled coffee onto his hand, but he didn't seem to notice.

"It's not Iggy's place, unfortunately for us," Roy continued. "It's one of the abandoned castles just over the border with the Mushroom Kingdom. Apparently it had been occupied by squatters from both kingdoms – begging your pardon, Princess – but they're all gone now. Someone set fire to the place."

Peach set her cup down with a sharp rattle. "Mario. It's got to be Mario."

"Mario?" Bowser and Roy asked in unison.

"I was afraid of this," Peach sighed. "We may be in more trouble than we thought."

Trouble in Paradise

"What you have to understand about Mario," Peach began, "is that he wants to be a hero. The problem is that he's a stranger to our world, and he doesn't think anything here is real."

"That's just our luck, isn't it," Bowser grumbled. "I've heard about things like this happening before, but I never thought I'd have to deal it myself."

Roy tapped the top of the table with his claws to get their attention. "Hold on, there's someone from another world here?"

Peach sighed. "Two someones, in fact. They're of the same race as me and Daisy, meaning that they've been mistaken by my people as royalty. I've been trying to find a way to send them home, but they're in no hurry to leave."

"When you say you've been trying to find a way to send them home, what do you mean?" Roy asked.

"They came from somewhere underground, but they can't explain where. I sent several parties of toads down into the tunnel they emerged from, but none of them made it very far. As I'm sure you both know, there are... things... in the underground that make navigation difficult. Finally I made an attempt myself, but I was unable to locate any sort of gate."

"You went down there alone?" Bowser interjected.

Peach nodded. "Of course. My skill is sufficient for the purpose, but my time was limited. I couldn't let it be known that I was trying to find a way to send our two guests back into the underworld."

"So why send them back at all?" Roy cut in. "Why not just give them one of the empty castles and let them fend for themselves? I mean, your nobility can't be half as bad as ours."

Bowser shot him a look, but Peach shook her head. "No, it's a valid

question," she responded, "but they're not nobility. The younger one is okay, but the older one is a nightmare. The Mushroom Kingdom is so different than where they came from that he thinks it's some sort of fantasy. He doesn't realize how hard I've had to work to..."

Peach coughed and took a sip of tea.

Roy reached around and removed a pipe from his jacket. He stuffed the bowl with an oily substance that he withdrew from a small pouch, and the pungent smell of tanooki weed filled the air. He inhaled and tilted his head back as he blew out a thin stream of smoke.

"So there are other worlds..." he said, letting his words trail off.

Bowser appeared to be deep in thought. "The machines of the old kingdoms still work, then," he muttered to himself.

Peach suddenly felt very tired. She set her cup down and rose to her feet.

"If you two will excuse me," she said, "it's been a long day, and I'd like to be shown to my room."

An hour or two later, Peach had settled onto a cushion laid out on a wooden veranda constructed along a portion of the rusted metal exterior of the castle. The sun was setting above the trees, and a golden twilight filtered down into the lower forest, making the junk in the scattered piles below glow like treasure. The nearby branches were free of webs, but Peach had noticed that the mosquito netting over her bed was reinforced with metal wire. She hoped she wouldn't catch sight of one of the creatures that necessitated such precautions. The forest spiders might be harmless to the koopas, but she didn't want to try her luck.

Peach shifted her glass of fire flower juice in her hand, enjoying the sound the ice cubes made as they clinked against each other. It was high summer, and she wondered how they stored ice here with no underground cellars. With so many old parts lying around for the taking, it was possible that someone had constructed a device capable of manufacturing it.

She heard Bowser clomping toward her, but moving to avoid him felt like too much trouble. Before long he stepped out onto the veranda, which shook under his weight.

"Why don't you sit in a chair like a normal person?" he asked by way of greeting.

"I'm comfortable here," she answered.

Judging from the sounds he made, he had trouble lowering himself, but he finally managed to sit next to her. Peach resented his intrusion, and she refused to look at him.

"You could have told me," he finally said.

"I could have told you?"

"Yeah," he answered, rubbing the back of his head. "You could have told me about this Mario guy, seeing as how we share a border and all."

"Oh? Is that so. My apologies. You're certainly correct, I could have told you. Now why don't you tell me about Roy, who so courteously invited us into his castle? Did he kill his parents too? With spider venom, perhaps? And isn't it convenient, how we can't leave without one of his aircraft? It would be a pity if something were to happen to one of us here, where no one in my kingdom would think to look for me."

Peach glared at Bowser, who seemed genuinely taken aback.

"Hey, don't be that way. None of these guys can do anything to me."

Peach rolled her eyes. "That's very reassuring."

"Listen, you don't always have to act like a..."

She shot a sharp glance at him. "Like a what?"

"Like a princess, not all the time. I doubt that any koopa could get close enough to touch a hair on your head if you've been underground and come back to tell the tale." Bowser met her eyes

and gave a crooked half-smile.

"I'll drink to that," Peach responded, and then proceeded to do so, tipping her glass back. Bowser withdrew his flask and popped its lid open with his claw. "Mind if I join you?" he asked.

"Only if you share," Peach answered, and he tipped a small bit of the bright amber nectar into her glass. The ice hissed.

"It's unfiltered, but you should be fine," Bowser explained. "If you feel the need to breathe fire, try to aim it away from me."

Peach took a small sip, and she immediately felt a giddy rush of sensation as the heat rose to her head. The jolt of magic was so intense it was almost unbearable.

Bowser took a swig directly from his flask.

"Watch this," he said. He put a finger to his lips, grinning with closed teeth, and then pointed at a tangle of cobwebs hanging from a higher window. He parted his lips, and a jet of flame followed the direction of his finger, burning the dirty gray mass to ashes.

Despite herself, she laughed, less at the trick itself than at what they both knew was a pathetic attempt to impress her.

"Roy isn't so bad," Bowser said, screwing the lid back onto his flask. "He just likes to tinker with all the..." He paused to gesture toward the hills of metallic garbage that littered the ground below them. "He designed the propellers on our newest airship. He also cast the cannons here. He's a big fan of aerial marksmanship."

"It must run in the family," Peach scoffed.

"His real hobby, though," Bowser added as he lowered his voice and leaned closer to Peach, "is chasing the skirts of the ladies of Sarasaland. He overhears all sorts of rumors, which is why Ludwig suggested that I bring you here."

"And what rumors has he overheard?"

Bowser straightened his back, suddenly becoming more serious.

"Your royal cousin knows you're here, for one thing. Your councilors received your message that you'll be staying in the Koopa Kingdom as our guest, but they were powerless to stop Mario from pursuing you, and your cabinet has been in a state of low-level chaos ever since you left. Daisy apparently decided to let them stew in their incompetence while they figure out just how much they need you, and she set out after Mario herself."

Peach took another sip of the fire flower juice. "Daisy has the right of it." She sighed. "Can I confess something to you, Bowser? I don't think this kidnapping attempt originated in the Mushroom Kingdom."

"At the risk of offending your pride, I'm tempted to agree. That's why Kamek suggested we keep you moving, but the situation with Mario changes things."

"Do you think he's a pawn?"

"If he wasn't to begin with, he almost certainly is now, although I doubt he understands himself as such. If he destroyed an entire castle for the sheer joy of it, he may not be the sort of tool anyone is capable of wielding. That's why I wish you had told me."

Even with his accent shifting the intonation of his words, Peach could still sense something in Bowser's voice that intrigued her, a sort of petulant vulnerability. Perhaps he had wanted a closer relationship between their two kingdoms and resented her for not using this obvious excuse to contact him.

"With all due respect," she managed to respond, "your kingdom seems to have enough problems of its own."

"As does yours," he shot back. "What was that you said before about Mario not being able to realize how hard you've had to work to – do what, exactly? Maintain order in a kingdom surrounded by hostile forces? Did you think I didn't notice? BECAUSE I NOTICE THINGS – "

"Have you noticed that smoke is coming out of your nose?"

"DAMN IT ALL," Bowser roared. Peach laughed as Bowser expelled

a torch of flame into the air.

Bowser stood up with the same lack of grace he had exhibited when he sat down. "Anyway, dinner's ready. I can't promise there won't be any roasted arachnids, but Roy runs a tight ship, and I'm sure he already knows more about your preferences than you do yourself. One of his staff is waiting outside in the hallway to guide you, so join us whenever you're ready."

"In a minute," Peach said, watching the night descend as she finished her drink. She thought about what Bowser had said. She couldn't ally with the Koopa Kingdom without risking trouble, but perhaps she might be able to consider its king as something resembling a friend.

A Separate Peace

A castle in the Koopa Kingdom had been attacked. Bowser had to return to his own castle immediately, and Peach insisted on going with him. The asphalt of the roads leading south from the forest was too pitted and cracked to be drivable, so Bowser had requisitioned a small airship from Roy. Bowser, as the more experienced pilot, flew the craft, and Peach felt restless with nothing to do except watch the scenery as enormous bones and rusted metal hulks sped by below.

"Do you have any cigarettes left?" she asked.

Bowser gestured behind him. "Jacket pocket," he grunted.

Peach turned and fished out a cigarette before holding it out to him. "Light it for me." She could do it herself, but she wanted to provoke some sort of reaction. Bowser had been quiet since they left, which was unusual for him.

He flicked the tip of her cigarette lightly with one of his claws, and it glowed red. Peach inhaled and blew the smoke toward the air vent. Bowser held out his hand, and she passed the cigarette to him. He closed his eyes as he took a long drag.

"The master of the castle," she ventured. "Is he one of your allies?"

"No, I can't say he is," Bowser responded, returning the cigarette to her. "Morton's a strange guy. It's probably better for everyone that he's been deposed."

"What do you mean?"

"We've all dabbled in dark magic, but he takes it too far."

"I haven't."

"You haven't what?"

"Dabbled in dark magic."

Bowser shrugged. "Suit yourself."

"No, I meant that I don't know what 'dark magic' entails."

He looked at her from the corner of his eye. "You really don't know?"

"Why don't you enlighten me."

"It mostly involves reanimating the dead, that sort of thing."

"That sounds disgusting."

"It is. My father outlawed the practice."

"You said everyone dabbles in dark magic."

"If you knew you could make a skeleton dance, wouldn't you try it at least once?"

"Is it normal for people in your family to have skeletons lying around?"

"Look, my point is that Morton's obsession with the undead makes me nervous."

Peach had heard about such things, but she had thought that "dark magic" was merely a series of legends and rumors. Still, she had seen worse things in the ruins of the old kingdoms.

"Are you afraid of ghosts, or civil unrest?" she asked.

"The last thing I need is someone with royal blood raising his own army, alive or dead," Bowser answered. "It's just that, if I called Morton out on it, that'd give him the excuse he needed to attack me."

"That seems like an awfully flimsy justification for war."

"Yeah, well. My father killed his father, and he's got no love for me."

The sun sunk lower in the sky to the west, and Peach adjusted the filter setting on her goggles, thinking about what Bowser wasn't saying. Morton's army hadn't saved him from Mario.

"Anyway," Bowser continued, tilting the ship slightly to the south and out of the glare of the setting sun, "I had Morton and his retainers brought to my castle, but hopefully you won't have to meet any of them. They're a creepy bunch."

"Aren't you worried they'll take advantage of the opportunity to harm you in some way?"

Bowser raised a corner of his mouth in a smile. "You sound like you've had to deal with this sort of thing before."

"My mother didn't leave behind a great deal of goodwill when she did my kingdom the courtesy of dying." Peach took a final drag on her cigarette. She almost couldn't believe she was telling the koopa king this, but he would probably understand better than anyone. "Sometimes I feel like my entire life has been a long process of cleaning up the mess she left behind."

"Is that why you're so nice all the time?"

"I'm not nice," Peach said, dropping her cigarette butt to the floor and snuffing it with the toe of her boot.

"Then you've got everyone fooled. Must be tough."

Peach looked at Bowser, but he wasn't smiling. She looked away. "When my mother died, I swore that I wouldn't be ruthless like her, that there had to be another way. It was naïve of me to think so, but now it's too late to change."

"My father was too nice," Bowser responded, "It's what got him killed. The Koopa Kingdom isn't the sort of place that rewards civility. And now we've got you here. Tell me, Peach, what does a nice person do in a situation like this?"

"I don't know what a nice person would do, but a person like me would use the presence of a foreign princess to his advantage. Your advisor Kamek said that you need a reason for me to be in your kingdom, and that some sort of reception party would serve nicely. Now all the pieces are in place, aren't they? Morton is visiting you because of an event of state, and no one needs to know that his

castle was attacked."

Bowser nodded. "That's along the lines of what I was thinking. But do we really need a party? Can't we launch the new airship instead?"

Peach shook her head. "No, absolutely not. Don't be ridiculous. Do I have to remind you that your treaty with my kingdom holds that neither of us will maintain a standing military?"

"Dammit Peach, it's one ship."

"You need to throw a party, Bowser."

"Fine," he scowled. "But you should know this – you survived by being nice, but I had to survive by being mean. The larger the gathering, the meaner I have to be."

"That's all right," she said, laying a hand on his shoulder. "I can be the sweet to your mean."

Claws and Lace

Peach placed her gloved hand in Bowser's claws. He was wearing a dress uniform, and he looked thoroughly uncomfortable. The waves of a sea of voices rose and fell on the other side of the door in front of them.

"Are you ready?" Peach asked.

"Ready when you are," he answered.

"Okay." Peach squeezed his hand. "Let's do this."

Bowser pushed the door open.

The grand hall in Peach's castle was the most beautiful room in the building, with a polished tile floor and elaborate stained glass windows set into the bays between carved marble columns. The space that served the same purpose in Bowser's castle was a large cavern of the volcano the structure had been built into. Metal catwalks had been raised over the sluggishly flowing lava that illuminated the naked rock walls. The large blades of lazily spinning fans stirred the air of the room, which was far too warm. Underneath the sound of the crowd was the rumbling of machines, and Peach was reminded of the cell in which she had first awakened.

If she was correct, and if she had been kidnapped by someone in Bowser's kingdom, then the person who had ordered her to be drugged and imprisoned was somewhere in this room. Peach didn't want to be here. She lifted her chin and smiled as brightly as she could.

The assembled koopas cheered as she and Bowser stepped forward onto the raised stage of a shallow balcony. Peach was surprised that there were so many of them. Unlike the Mushroom Kingdom, where the toads lived in scattered towns and villages, the wastelands of the Koopa Kingdom were too harsh and dangerous to support farms or small settlements. She had read that most koopas lived within the castle complexes of the royal family, but she hadn't

imagined that a population approaching that of her own castle city could occupy the inside of a mountain.

Bowser waved his hand, and a hush fell over the hall.

This is Princess Peach, of the Mushroom Kingdom , he announced in the koopa language, pushing her forward. She almost tripped, but she didn't let her annoyance at the sudden gesture show on her face.

She's here on her first visit to our kingdom, to see our tanks and airships , he continued. Peach grimaced inwardly at the mention of "tanks." She knew the Koopa Kingdom had them – everyone did – but it was gauche of Bowser to mention it.

The princess was very impressed. AS SHE SHOULD BE . Bowser burst into loud and theatrical laughter, and the crowd cheered.

So everybody be nice to her, or I'll smash your faces in. NOW LET'S EAT . Bowser raised his hands, and the koopas went wild. Peach couldn't believe it. Their king had treated them like children, and they loved him for it.

"Nice speech," she muttered through her smile.

"It gets the job done," he said, taking her hand and leading her down the stairs descending from the balcony to the main floor.

They were instantly mobbed, but Bowser's exaggerated movements, combined with the metal spikes ornamenting his clothing, kept the crowd at bay. He fumbled his way through a series of introductions, but it didn't take Peach long to notice that he seemed to know the name of everyone who approached him, a skill that had always eluded her. She soon realized that every awkward thing that came out of his mouth was almost perfectly designed to give her a chance to step in and display the gentle diplomacy she had worked to cultivate. Bowser snapped at annoyances and barked orders, but he did so for her benefit, shielding her from unpleasantness and skillfully maneuvering her through the gathered koopas. There was a calculated smoothness to Bowser's roughness, and Peach, who had been wary of Bowser's ability to handle himself as a public figure,

found herself relying on him as the evening progressed.

At a certain point, while Bowser was off being loud and obnoxious, a young man with dark skin and silver hair sidled up to her. Like Bowser, he had horns, but his were jet black and pointed backward. He bowed slightly and addressed her in her own language.

"Princess Peach Toadstool, it is an honor to make your acquaintance." His accent was resonant with vowels where Bowser's was jagged with consonants, and his voice was like velvet running along the edges of her ears. "I am Morton, the master of the castle on the plains."

"The honor is mine," Peach responded, fascinated by the gold-rimmed irises of his eyes. He smiled and held her gaze as he bent to kiss her hand. He cut a dashing figure in his finely tailored clothing, which was fashioned from fabric more commonly seen in the dress of the nobles of her own court. He smelled enticingly musky, like spiced sandalwood.

"I trust your stay in the Koopa Kingdom has been pleasant?" he asked. Without waiting for her to answer, he snapped his fingers over his head, and a serving girl appeared at his side, offering him wine. He took two glasses, and a flash of gold slipped from his hand into hers. The girl looked at him shyly and blushed as she left. He handed one of the glasses to Peach. The wine was pale and seemed to glow in the ambient light of the room.

"To your health, Your Highness," Morton said, clinking the rim of his glass against hers, "and to your courage. These are troubled times."

"To your health as well," Peach responded, "and to perseverance in the face of adversity."

Morton laughed lightly. "So you've heard about my little 'adversity,' have you? I think, Princess, that the two of us have much to discuss. Perhaps we can address the matter later, in a more private setting." His eyes met hers, and Peach could feel her face grow warm.

"I'm sure that can be arranged – " she began to say, but then Bowser was at her side once again.

She's not going anywhere alone in this castle , he announced, crossing his arms over his chest.

"The princess wouldn't be alone, Your Majesty, and surely we can agree that we must talk at our earliest convenience, which might not align with your schedule."

We're not 'surely agreeing' on anything right now, Morton. Save it for later.

"Ah, my apologies. You're quite correct. Matters of state aside, the music is starting soon. Might I borrow Her Highness for a dance?"

NO. YOU'RE NOT DANCING WITH HER.

The sudden vehemence of Bowser's outburst surprised Peach, but Morton merely shrugged and smiled at her. "Perhaps later, then. I'm certain our paths will cross again." Bowser scowled at him and then inserted himself between Peach and Morton's retreating back.

"I told you not to trust that guy," he growled.

"With all due respect, Bowser, he seems much more trustworthy than many of the people I've met in the past few days."

Bowser shook his head. "He dresses like a foreigner and smells like incense. Don't you think that's weird?"

Peach covered her smile with her gloved hand. "Are you jealous of him?"

Bowser rose to his full height and glared down at her. *I'm not jealous of anyone, PEOPLE ARE JEALOUS OF ME* , he pronounced, thumping his chest.

Peach suspected he was hiding something under his boast, and she realized what it was as soon as the musicians of a small orchestra began to tune their instruments.

Of course, of course , Peach said gently, unleashing her sunniest smile. *The honor of the first dance does go to the king, after all.*

Bowser gave a full-toothed grin. *You're damn right it does. And you're gonna dance with me!*

Under his breath he added, "Don't drink anything more until then. I can't dance worth shit."

"Don't worry," Peach whispered as she took his offered arm. "I can make even you look good."

The Imagination of Disaster

Luigi stared into the void, and the void stared back.

"What the fuck?!" he screamed as the piranha plant reared up at him, its gaping maw full of needle teeth. He leapt back, tripped over his own feet, and fell flat on his ass.

Daisy held out her hand, and red flames engulfed the creature. Its roasting flesh smelled like pork.

"You need to be more careful," Daisy chided him. "The pipes are infested with those things."

"Did you just shoot fire?" he asked her.

She scrunched her eyebrows together, looking at him with concern. "Of course I did," she answered. "Did you want me to let it bite you?"

"No, it's just, I thought," he stammered.

Shit , he cursed under his breath. Unlike his brother, he had never been able to talk to women. Pretty girls were just normal people, he knew that; but the knowledge, like all knowledge, was a pathetic candle burning against the darkness of a vast ignorance.

Luigi coughed into his hand, not meeting Daisy's eyes.

"I've never seen anyone do that," he said. "Human beings can't shoot fire where I come from."

"What's a 'human being'?"

Fantastic , he thought. Now his humanity was being called into question.

"I'm a human being. So is my brother."

Daisy shrugged and began walking. "Where did you and your brother come from, anyway?"

It was a valid question. Where did anyone come from? How did being ever spring from the great oblivion that stretched out endlessly before birth and after death?

"We came from underground," he answered.

"Oh, um," she looked troubled, as if there were something awkward she couldn't quite bring herself to say. "Are there more 'human beings' underground?"

"No, Mario and I are the only humans here. That I know of. There may be more, but..."

But I hope not , he couldn't bring himself to finish.

"Well, not even Toadstool royalty can command fire naturally. We need a little help."

Daisy removed the hibiscus flower from behind her ear, and suddenly she seemed less glamorous. Her skin and hair lost a bit of their luster, and her yellow jumpsuit lost a bit of its sheen.

She handed the flower to Luigi. He took it, and his mind exploded with the sudden understanding that he too could shoot fire if he so chose. He focused his will, and flames burst from his hand. The fire coalesced into a ball that bounced across the matted grass, leaving scorched circles of ash in its wake.

Daisy smiled. "That's pretty good, for a first try," she told him.

Luigi thought about giving the fire flower back to Daisy, but he didn't want to, not yet. The knowledge that magic was real, and that he was capable of performing it, made him feel giddy with power. He wondered if this was how Mario felt all the time.

"Keep inspecting the pipes," Daisy said. "There's got to be one that leads underground somewhere around here."

"Remind me what we're looking for again."

"According to Peach's maps, there should be a flute machine hidden somewhere around here. If we can find it, we can warp straight to

Bowser's castle. We'll sneak in, steal one of his tanks, and intercept Mario before he causes trouble."

Luigi shook his head. Somehow, in Daisy's plan involving "warping" by means of a "flute machine," it was the part about stealing that bothered him the most.

"Bowser is the ruler of the Koopa Kingdom, right?" he asked. "Can't we just ask him for a tank? You don't really think he's got the princess locked up somewhere, do you?"

"I wouldn't put it past him," she responded. "The koopas are all savages, and he's the worst of the lot. How do you think he became king?"

"I'm assuming it wasn't through an election."

Daisy laughed. "An election? You're funny, Luigi."

"No, I'm genuinely curious. How did he become king?"

Daisy turned to him. "It's a long story. Do you really want to know?"

Luigi did in fact want to know whose territory he would be invading. If he was going to be drawn and quartered by a murderous warlord, it was better to come to terms with the possibility sooner rather than later.

"Why don't you give me the short version."

"The short version? Bowser's father united the principalities of his kingdom, ending decades of civil war. He prohibited some of the more barbaric koopa customs, like cannibalism and blood feuds. Peach's mother, the former queen of the Mushroom Kingdom, hated him, but between the two of them they managed to work out a number of treaties. Most of them involve trade, but one of the more important ones holds that neither kingdom can have an army."

"But you said that Bowser has tanks," Luigi interrupted.

"Of course he does. Peach has tanks too."

"Does Peach intend to go to war with anyone?"

"That would be highly out of character for her, but she does need to defend her kingdom. Every so often there'll be a swarm from underground, and that's definitely a situation that calls for tanks."

"But we're going underground."

"Right. Speaking of which..." Daisy stopped in front of a large pipe that had oxidized into a deep shade of green. "It looks like we can get down from here."

Luigi walked over to the pipe, which leaned out of the grass at an angle. Rusty metal rungs jutted from its mossy interior. Daisy jumped over the edge and began climbing. Luigi followed her into the darkness.

When they reached the bottom, he couldn't see anything but the bright spot of sky above them.

"So, uh... Do we use magic to light this place up?" he asked.

"No, we use a flashlight, like normal people."

Daisy reached into her satchel and withdrew a contraption that looked like a camera. She pulled a chain on its side, and with a clanking of gears it produced a strong beam of light.

She passed the device to Luigi and consulted a small book. "We should be close to the flute station," she said. "If you see a piranha plant, just ignore it. They catch their prey aboveground. Not even one of those things will eat the stuff that's down here."

Daisy set off into the tunnel, and Luigi trudged along behind her. The air flowing through the corridor smelled like the hospital ward where his mother died.

"You said the princess mapped this place?" he asked, wanting to drown out the soft clicking and chirping sounds he heard echoing along the slimy stone walls.

"She didn't map it, but she annotated some of the maps she found in

the castle library."

"And you think someone like that, someone who would have come to a place like this on her own, could have been kidnapped?"

Daisy winced and shot him a look over her shoulder.

"Look, I didn't want to get into it, but fine. Bowser's father is generally thought of as a hero, but he killed a lot of people to become king. You've noticed that Peach and I are different from the toads?"

"Yes." It would have been difficult not to notice.

"Okay, so Bowser's family is different from the koopas. They're almost invincible, so you have to put a lot of effort into killing one of them. Let's just say that Bowser's father put a lot of effort into killing people. He apparently got bored with it at a certain point, and by the time Bowser came around he had become something resembling a decent person. Peach and I were very young, but we still remember when he was assassinated, because everyone thought we were right on the verge of another war. Then Bowser became king, and nothing happened. Think about that for a second. This kid was right in the middle of a bunch of regional lords who hated his father and wanted nothing more than to take his throne, and somehow he survived. Why do you think that is?"

"Maybe he's just a good politician."

"If he were such a good politician, Peach would have met him before now, and she wouldn't have sent her kingdom a message that was obviously written under duress. Your brother is a crazy person, no offense – "

"None taken."

"But Bowser might be even crazier. Nobody knows much about him. Although when it comes to ruthless and coldblooded rulers, Peach's mother wasn't much better..."

Daisy let her words trail off. The beam of the flashlight illuminated something incomprehensibly horrible. Luigi couldn't look away.

Years ago, Luigi and Mario had been given money and sent off on a city bus to visit the Bronx Zoo while their father handled some "business" at home. Luigi still remembered the forlorn face of the elephant that wandered around its enclosure as if it had never known what it meant to be free.

The beast caught in the torch beam was as large and leathery as that elephant, but it was also maddeningly wet, pulsing in the viscous fluids that emanated from its porous hide. Its large black eyes gleamed dully, and its mouth was crammed so full of teeth that it was unable to hide its constant mastication.

The flashlight shook in Luigi's hand, and the trembling beam moved to show that the wretched thing was not alone.

Daisy clicked her tongue. "Damn it! It's just our luck to run into goombas."

As the creatures ambled toward them, Daisy pulled something that looked like a mulberry leaf from one of her pockets. She crammed it into her mouth and grimaced as she chewed, a dribble of dark juice running down her chin. She screwed her eyes shut and, to Luigi's immense surprise, stiff bones of hair emerged just above her cheekbones while pointed ears stretched up like horns from her hair. Daisy reached around and adjusted the back of her jumpsuit, and a bushy tail popped out. Her mouth twisted in a silent scream as her fingers lengthened into terrible, bladelike claws. Swinging her hands like knives in front of her, she took off down the tunnel and leapt into the air, seeming to float as she launched herself at the first goomba.

Luigi's strongest impulse was to flee from the monsters in front of him, but then he remembered he could shoot fire from his hands. There was no justification for this. There was no justification for anything in this world. He set the flashlight on the ground and ran to join Daisy.

It was impossible to make meaningful choices. He would surge up in the world and define himself afterwards.

Inconvenient Truths

The music had begun, and she and Bowser danced. True to his word, he was terrible, but they both managed to put on a good show. Although she barely had anything to drink, Peach grew uncomfortably hot, and her head started to spin as she stood and talked. And then Ludwig was beside her, looking shabby yet dignified in his strange clothing.

"Bowser told me I should get you away from here. Will you come with me?"

"How kind of him. But why?"

"He is concerned for your safety, and rightly so. I'm concerned as well, since the koopas cannot properly enjoy themselves while you're in their presence, and no one wants a crowd of this size to become restless. Would you prefer to go to your rooms, or would you care to stop by one of the castle's hot springs?"

"I'd like a bath. Ludwig, what do you mean, 'properly enjoy themselves'?"

"Oh, you know." He twirled his hand. "Fighting, feats of strength, blood sports, that sort of foolishness."

Peach smiled, imagining the slender-fingered and silver-tongued Ludwig engaging in something as plebian as wrestling. "And will you join them?" she asked.

"Heavens, no. I'd rather ride the elevators and see where they go. Speaking of which, I do believe I've found a shortcut to the springs." Ludwig led her to the iron grating covering an elevator shaft and pulled it open. "After you," he said, inviting her into the cage.

He threw a combination of levers, pulling her out of the way of the steam jets released by the machinery. Like Bowser, he didn't seem to mind when the hissing vapor struck his legs. Perhaps it was true, Peach thought to herself. Perhaps the lineage of the koopa kings

really was invincible.

When the elevator shuddered to a halt, Ludwig pulled the grating aside and bowed, remaining on the elevator platform. "It would be my pleasure to accompany you, but I must extricate the king from the festivities before he does something regrettable. Go down this tunnel, and you'll find a small cavern looking out over the side of the mountain. Everything should be laid out for you. I'll send an attendant in after you shortly."

"Ludwig." Peach called out, catching him before he pulled the levers again.

"Yes?"

"Why are you being so nice to me?"

"I could very well ask the same of you, but I suppose we have a common goal, you and I – we both want to survive without being murdered in our sleep and fed to the dinosaurs. Good luck, Peach."

She waved to him as the metal cage clanked up and away. "And godspeed, Ludwig."

Peach kicked off her heels and walked barefoot onto the warm stone floor, the short train of her evening gown trailing behind her. She pulled off her gloves, finger by finger, and then removed her tiara with her bare hands, placing everything on top of an obsidian column jutting from the floor. In front of her was a steaming pool of water.

The moisture in the room made Peach's skin clammy with sweat. She wanted to remove herself from her elaborate dress, but she didn't know where to begin.

"I think you should just rip it off," came a familiar voice from behind her.

Peach felt her hair stand on end. "Wendy?"

The general stepped into Peach's line of sight from behind a bend in the wall. "One and the same."

Wendy was the last person Peach wanted to see at this moment, but she couldn't think of an excuse to leave.

Wendy laughed at her expression. "Don't look so frightened. I don't bite," she said, flashing her teeth through her grin.

"I wasn't expecting to find you here," Peach said.

"Parties aren't my thing," Wendy responded, shrugging out of her suit jacket. "And I'd rather talk to you," she continued as she unbuttoned her collar, "away from Bowser."

"Bowser told me he trusts you."

"He should trust more people. We're all on his side, each of us in our own way. Oddly enough, he seems to trust you," she said, pulling off her shirt.

"Why shouldn't he trust me?"

"That's a good question, isn't it? Why don't we go ahead and get this all out in the open," Wendy suggested, letting her pants drop to the floor. "You need help with that dress?"

Peach sighed. If Bowser had confidence in Wendy's loyalty, then she would have to as well.

"Yes, fine. Thank you," she said, turning her back to Wendy. She heard the padding of bare feet, and then the sharp point of a claw was at her neck. Peach held her breath and closed her eyes. Her dress fell away from her as Wendy sliced through the fabric.

Peach couldn't help but smile. "That was a bit dramatic," she said.

"You were only going to wear it once anyway," Wendy responded.

Peach gathered the fallen gown and put it aside before stepping into the pool. She looked out into the night sky beyond the cavern as she lowered herself into the warm water.

"Hot springs are nice, aren't they? I bet you don't have any of these in the Mushroom Kingdom," Wendy shot at her.

"Have you ever been to the Mushroom Kingdom?" Peach countered.

"Many times. What I'm more interested in discussing is why you haven't been here."

"I'm a princess. My duties keep me busy. I can't travel."

"Bowser says the same thing," Wendy said, cupping water in her hands and pouring it over her bright pink hair. "Minus the 'princess' part, of course. Not that it's done any good in helping him prevent this crisis."

"Why don't we be honest with each other," Peach said, sitting back against the smooth wall of the stone basin and fixing her eyes on Wendy. "What is this crisis, exactly?"

"You still don't know why you're here?"

"No, in fact. I don't. If you know more than I do, now is the time to tell me. Before Mario arrives."

"That's precisely it, isn't it? Bowser is much smarter than he looks – although in all fairness, he looks like an idiot. Ever since we got reports of two outsiders appearing in your kingdom, he's been researching earlier occurrences of the phenomenon, and he's convinced that each instance has ended in disaster. He also seems to think that the machines under the Mushroom Kingdom aren't as quiet as perhaps they should be."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't try to deny it. We've all been tempted by the relics of the old kingdoms, and the recent prosperity of the Mushroom Kingdom hasn't gone unnoticed."

"What do you want from me, Wendy? If you know all this, then you know what sort of ruler my mother was. If I didn't help my kingdom recover from her tyranny, I would have been killed, and there would have been chaos."

"Oh, there might still be chaos. I think you're underestimating your value to us, and to every other kingdom that shares a border with

you."

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is that, as the leader of my own kingdom's military, it's in my best interests that you remain alive. I can't say the same about everyone in the Mushroom Kingdom, though."

"We're not killers, Wendy."

"Everyone plays the game differently, but I think you understand exactly how precarious your hold on your throne is."

"All right, I'll humor you. What cause would anyone have for forcing me to abdicate?"

"What cause? You know exactly what cause. 'What cause' is headed for this castle as we speak. I can't blame you for mistaking him and his brother as royalty, but you've landed yourself in a delicate situation. Really, Peach, you should thank us for giving you an opportunity to make him disappear."

Peach stood, seething with fury. Her suspicions had been confirmed. She struggled to remain calm.

"You did this," she said softly. "You brought me here."

Wendy looked up at her, her expression unreadable. "Kamek and I prevented a war, Peach."

"Does the king know?"

"Who can say? But I'll tell you one thing – I saw him dance with you, and I'll be damned if I've ever seen him so happy. I think he might be more dangerous to you than Mario."

"I'll be the judge of that."

Wendy shrugged. "Then by all means, go ahead and judge," she said, raising her hand and gesturing toward a set of shelves built into the cavern wall. "We've got some clothes laid out for you. I hope they're to your taste."

"The elevator you came down on goes all the way up to his private rooms," Wendy added as Peach stepped out of the pool. "But, Princess – "

Peach turned to face her.

"Be careful."

The Princess and the King

Peach slammed the door to Bowser's chambers open. He was on the other side of the room, a sheaf of papers in his hand. He had been pacing, but he stopped and stared at her.

"You knew. You *knew* ."

"Peach, I – "

"How long have you known?"

"I don't – "

"Answer me, Bowser."

He sighed and set the papers down. "I suspected ever since Kamek asked you to stay here."

"You suspected?" Peach stepped forward. The metal door closed behind her.

"You've got to understand that I don't know how to handle this, Peach. Now that you're here, how long do we keep you? Do we just send you back? And what am I supposed to say to my staff? What about the ones who already know? Do you want me to admit that you were smuggled here under my nose? You know I can't do that."

Peach was surprised by his unguarded honesty. For once he was not yelling or issuing commands. With his armored regalia removed and his shirt loosened, he looked just as beleaguered as she felt.

"You know, Bowser, you don't *have* to tell anyone the truth."

Bowser nodded. "The truth can be misleading."

Peach smiled. "And as for the rest? Delegate. Tell different stories to different people."

"I can imagine such a strategy might become a problem eventually."

"Does it matter? Don't you have better things to worry about?"

"We've got to get you home, Peach."

"I will return to my kingdom when it is my will to do so and not a moment sooner. We need to speak with Kamek."

Bowser frowned. "I've been putting that off. In his defense, I don't think his intentions are bad."

"Right, right. Of course not." Peach collapsed onto a couch. "He only had me drugged and stashed in a cell in your dungeons."

"It was a storage closet in a corridor off one of the generator rooms," Bowser retorted, completely deadpan.

"Fine. I apologize for insulting your hospitality. He had me drugged and stashed in a closet."

Bowser walked to a cabinet set into one of the shelves surrounding the room and removed two crystal glasses and a bottle of distilled fire flower juice. He handed Peach a glass and poured three fingers of amber liquid from the bottle. He sat on the opposite end of the couch and poured a glass for himself. He extended his glass to Peach, and she reciprocated, clinking the rim of her cup against his.

"To your kingdom," he toasted.

"To yours," she answered.

The warmth of the alcohol spread from her mouth to her fingers.

"I think Kamek and Wendy were worried about you."

"Excuse me?"

"You're just a princess, right? You're not a full monarch. You share your power with your council and a senate, and both are headed by the guy who used to be your regent."

Peach swirled the liquid in her glass. Her mother had indeed left the kingdom in Toadsworth's hands when she was on her deathbed.

Peach had welcomed the gesture at the time, but Toadsworth did not step down from his post when she came of age.

Bowser watched her thinking until she met his eyes and gestured for him to continue.

"If you were in his position, what would you do? I know I wouldn't give up my privilege so easily."

"Toadsworth has done nothing to warrant my suspicion."

"He either steps down, or he doesn't – and he hasn't."

"What exactly are you suggesting?"

"I'll be damned if I know. You haven't tried to outmaneuver your former regent, and I don't interrupt Kamek's little games. We're standing on the crust over the same lava."

"That we are. If I'm to be honest with you, this whole thing feels more than a little drastic and poorly conceived. Was there really a need for such secrecy?"

"I didn't know what the situation was. You know, with Mario. I sent you messages, but you never responded directly."

Peach's temper flared. "You could have talked to me yourself. Directly."

Bowser raised his voice. "You think it's easy to be the king of a place like this?"

Peach found herself comforted by his show of impatience. He was using his anger to cover his vulnerability, and perhaps this was his way of apologizing, roundabout though it was.

"Duly noted. We understand one another, then." Peach drained her glass and reached back to set it on top of a pile of loose paper on the table behind the couch. Bowser did the same.

"What I still don't understand is why you didn't tell me earlier," Peach continued. "Why not yesterday, or the day before? Do you really

think I couldn't handle this, or that I wouldn't eventually figure it out on my own?"

Peach's voice became sharper as she spoke. "I thought you respected me. I was beginning to think you liked me. Do you really think so poorly of me? I thought – "

Bowser moved across the couch. He held a single claw to her mouth.

"Fine? You want to know? I'll tell you. I was being selfish."

Peach took his hand in her own and lifted it from her face.

"What do you mean?"

"I wanted you here just a few days longer."

He pressed his hand against her cheek and, leaning down, kissed her.

His lips brushed hers lightly. When she did not move away, he drew closer. She reached up to touch his face.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked.

"I don't know," he responded, and kissed her again.

She returned the kiss. "I don't know what we're doing. I don't know what I'm doing here."

"I wish I could keep you." Bowser closed his eyes and slipped his hand over hers, kissing her palm.

Peach leaned forward, laying her face against his neck. She could feel his pulse race.

"I can't leave my kingdom."

He kissed the top of her head, and then her ear, and then her temple. He kissed the side of her mouth and then, when she turned to him, kissed her lips, intertwining his fingers with hers.

"Then I'll come to you," he breathed into her ear. "I'll kidnap you myself."

Peach smiled. "Who knows," she said. "Maybe I'll kidnap you next time."

Fire Is Not Hot Enough

Peach pushed herself away from Bowser. Kissing him made her feel breathless, and this was not the time or the place to lose control.

"I need water," she explained to Bowser, who seemed hurt by her sudden distance.

"Right," he said, shifting uncomfortably. Peach was amused by his unwillingness to stand as she got to her feet. Without meeting her eyes, Bowser pointed to a clear glass bottle sweating moisture onto the papers covering one of the tables behind the couch.

He held out his hand to her. "Listen, Peach..."

Before she could take a step forward, an eerie whistling filled the room. Peach turned to its source just in time to see Kamek pop into the air.

"You Highness, Your Majesty, I'm sorry to interrupt – " Kamek began.

"Goddammit," Bowser spat.

" – but Mario is at the gates of the castle," he announced, adjusting his glasses nervously.

"HOW DID HE GET IN HERE," Bowser roared.

"It appears he rode some sort of dinosaur through the underground," Kamek answered.

"That can't be possible," Peach muttered.

"We need to stop him before he gets any farther," Kamek continued. "Your Majesty, please come with me. There's no time to lose."

"I'm coming too," Peach said.

Kamek cringed. "That would be highly inadvisable. I don't think Your

Highness understands how dangerous Mario is."

Peach clenched her fists and then relaxed, forcing herself to remain calm. "No, Kamek," she said softly, "I don't think *you* understand how dangerous Mario is. I will make my own decisions regarding my safety, and I am coming with you."

Kamek seemed about to object, so she shot a glance at Bowser. "If the princess says she's coming with us, then she's coming with us," he shrugged.

As Bowser and Kamek watched her, Peach walked over to the bookshelf, poured herself a glass of water, and drank. Neither of them said anything until she was done.

"All right," she finally said. "Let's go."

With a troubled look on his face, Kamek withdrew a transporter rod from his overcoat and flashed it first at Bowser and then at Peach. In a burst of light and color, Peach felt herself grow thin. She closed her eyes, and the air turned scorching hot.

When Peach opened her eyes, she found herself on a bridge made of stone and metal suspended over a cauldron of lava. On the far side were the ruins of an enormous door that was still smoking from the aftereffects of an explosion.

Emerging from the wreckage was Mario. A dirty yellow cape was slung over his shoulders, its hanging edge fringed with glowing circuitry. The gloves on his hands were stained black with layers of grime. His face was unreadable.

"Mario!" Peach called out.

Bowser stepped in front of her. "Who are you, and what the fuck are you doing here!?"

Mario tipped the bill of his cap at Peach. "Princess! I have come to save you!"

Bowser pushed up his sleeves as he stomped toward Mario. "You're not saving anybody."

Mario sneered as he pulled a fire flower from a pocket of his overalls. "That's what you think, you goddamn reptile."

He shot a ball of fire at Bowser, who knocked it away with his hand. "Get out of my castle," he growled.

Mario's expression shifted into a caricature of sadistic glee. "The mushrooms told me you can't be killed," he said through a maniacal grin. "Let's find out if that's true."

Bowser held up his hands. "Look, Mario, or whoever you are. I don't want to hurt you..."

Without giving him a chance to finish his sentence, Mario leapt forward, pulling a sledgehammer from a holster on his utility belt and slamming it into Bowser's outstretched claws.

"WHAT THE FUCK," Bowser screamed. As a reflex, he leaned forward and spewed fire at Mario. Mario jumped straight into the air and kicked Bowser in the face, knocking him toward the side of the bridge. Before Bowser could recover, Mario ran to him and drove his sledgehammer into Bowser's ribs, propelling him closer to the edge.

Peach watched all of this play out with concern, unsure of how to step in. She had thought that Bowser would be able to subdue Mario easily, but it seemed as though Mario had come prepared to kill anyone who got in his way. Mario might not be able to win against Bowser in a fair fight, but not even Bowser could survive a fall into the lava below.

Mario swung his hammer again, but Bowser caught it and hurled it away. As Mario stepped back, Bowser backhanded him, sending him flying.

"That's for Morton, asshole," Bowser said. "Nobody fucks with my castles except me."

Mario didn't get up from where he lay collapsed on the ground. As Bowser approached him, Mario suddenly jumped up and punched him in the gut, knocking him backwards. Bowser was perilously close to the crumbling edge of the bridge. Mario met Bowser's eyes,

smiled, and withdraw a star crystal from a pouch hanging from his belt. He licked his lips and popped the crystal into his mouth like candy. Instantly his skin began to flash with bright bursts of luminescence.

"Oh shit," Bowser said, taking several steps back. He was dangerously close to falling.

"That is enough!" Peach declared, rushing at them through the air. Unlike Mario, she didn't need a cape to fly.

Peach came to a stop in front of Bowser and faced Mario. "You wanted to rescue me?" she asked him. "Well, here I am."

Mario's eyes glittered with the power of the star crystal. "I'll deal with you later, Princess," he hissed, "but we're not leaving until I take care of business. Get out of my way."

Peach felt her skin grow cold as it began to kindle into flames. She had suffered enough of Mario's flagrant disrespect. If Bowser couldn't strike him down, then she would do it herself. As her rage grew, the world around her narrowed into a tiny point of focus. Mario stared at her in horror.

Suddenly a familiar voice broke her concentration. "Peach, wait!" She tore her eyes away from Mario and saw her cousin dashing across the bridge on the back of a Yoshi.

Luigi rode behind her. As the dinosaur skidded to a stop, he jumped off and tripped over his own feet as he landed.

The malice vanished from Mario's face. "Luigi?"

Luigi got to his knees. "Mario?"

Mario broke into a smile. "Luigi!"

Luigi stood up, and the two brothers embraced.

A Princess, Rescued

"You beautiful bastard, how are you?" Mario laughed, pounding Luigi's back.

"Bro, what are you doing all the way out here?" Luigi asked, adjusting his cap.

Mario cocked his thumb at Peach. "I'm saving the princess, what does it look like?"

Luigi shook his head. "You always jump into this sort of shit, Mario. Leave the princess alone."

Mario turned and gestured at Bowser. "Do you think I can let this sleazy cocksucker show up and kidnap the girl who's putting us up in her castle? That's just bad manners."

Bowser's eyes burned red, and his claws were tacky with blood. He was breathing heavily, and plumes of smoke emerged from his nose.

Luigi looked at Bowser, paled, and quickly looked away. "I think you're in over your head here."

Mario laughed. "I've been in worse fights."

"Yeah, okay, but," Luigi frowned, "did you try talking to him?"

"There's no use talking to a monster like that, bro."

"YOU CAN FUCKING TALK TO ME," Bowser roared behind them.

"I don't think you're helping," Daisy said, her hand on Peach's shoulder.

Peach decided that it was safe to ignore Mario for the time being. If nothing else, at least his brother seemed to have some sense. "Thanks for coming to find me," she said to Daisy.

"I guess I got here just in time," Daisy responded. "You looked like you were about to toast that guy. You could have gotten yourself into serious trouble if you killed him. What have I told you about losing your temper?"

"I don't want to hear it from you," Peach said, tilting her head toward the Yoshi standing behind Luigi. "You looked like you were ready to charge him yourself."

Behind them, the iron drawbridge blocking the entrance to the castle rattled into motion. Roy ducked under it, a bazooka balanced on his shoulder.

Hey, what'd I miss? he asked. His eyes jumped from Bowser to Peach to Daisy. *Hi Princess* , he said, grinning.

Hello Roy , Daisy responded, nodding her head in greeting. *Fancy meeting you here* . She held out her hand, and Roy kissed it in an exaggerated show of chivalry.

Wendy and Kamek followed along behind him and positioned themselves on either side of Peach.

"Hey Peach, you okay?" Wendy asked her.

Peach brushed the ash off her dress. "I'm fine, Wendy. Thanks."

"DOESN'T ANYONE WANT TO KNOW HOW I AM."

"Ah, Your Majesty," Kamek acknowledged him. "Has the princess taken care of matters here?"

"Yes, Kamek, we're quite done," Peach answered, glancing over his shoulder as Ludwig and Morton walked through the drawbridge gate.

Kamek, Wendy, would you mind if I had a word with you? Daisy asked, pulling them aside. As Roy followed her, he shifted his bazooka. It went off in his hands with a deafening boom. The Yoshi reared up, and Ludwig and Morton rushed to subdue it.

Peach and Bowser were left standing alone. Bowser shifted his

weight and ran a hand through his hair.

"Do you want to thank me?" Peach asked, placing her hand over the spot where Mario had struck him.

"For what?" he grimaced.

"Saving you," she answered. Her hand began to glow, and Bowser sucked in his breath.

"I could have won that fight," he grumbled, wiping a stream of blood off his forehead.

"Sure thing, tough guy," she murmured.

Bowser glanced at Wendy and Daisy, who were embroiled in an intense conversation while Kamek and Roy looked on. He turned his eyes toward Ludwig and Luigi, who were chatting amiably while Mario and Morton spat insults at each other. He then shifted his attention down to Peach, who was focused on healing his wound.

"You don't need to do that," he said to her.

"You didn't need to pick a fight with Mario."

"He started it."

"You let yourself be manipulated."

"You're one to talk."

"I still don't know what to do about him."

"Are you gonna go home with him?"

"I don't think I have a choice."

"Listen, Peach," Bowser said as he put his hand over hers. "You don't have to go back to the Mushroom Kingdom right away. You're here as our guest, remember? Let me introduce you to the rest of my family, and – "

"I don't think that's a good idea," Peach interrupted him. A pained

look flashed across his face, and she withdrew her hand. "I need to see how things are at home. If your general and your advisor felt it necessary to kidnap me, I have a feeling that there are a few things they need to tell me."

"Your Highness, if I may," Kamek interjected, suddenly at her side. "We do indeed have a great deal to discuss, but we can talk on the airship back to the Mushroom Kingdom, where I'm certain we won't be overheard."

"Peach, I can't even tell you how much I can't wait to get back," Daisy said, walking over and dragging Wendy behind her. "But before that – " she kicked Wendy in the shin.

Wendy shrugged. "I'm sorry I abducted you, and I'm sorry you woke up the way you did. That's not how I intended things to go. It's just that *somebody* threw a wrench in our plans before we could get things sorted out," she said, shooting a look at Bowser.

"In all honesty, being kidnapped isn't the worst thing that's ever happened to me," Peach sighed. "But next time, make sure that the king comes to get me himself."

Bowser blinked at her. "Next time?"

How the Game Is Played

Our lives are not teleological, Luigi ruminated, taking a drag on his cigarette. There are no endpoints, and there are no goals. For all that we like to believe we're making progress, every single one of us ends up dead and rotting. Passionate commitment is meaningless in the face of the infinite absurdity of the universe.

And yet, he thought, watching his brother lob a tennis ball at Daisy, maybe it's not so bad to enjoy things as they come.

Princess Peach sat beside him on a canvas folding chair, a pleasant smile painted on her face. Her eyes weren't following the action in front of them. When a toad brought her a glass of chilled sweet tea, she took it and thanked her politely. The girl also offered a glass to Luigi, but he waved it away. He didn't like sweet things. Judging from the way she set her tea down untasted, he suspected that Peach didn't either.

Luigi wondered how no one could have noticed this, but then it came to him that people probably had. Peach was a princess, however, and she was expected to wear pink and eat cake and smile during events she obviously wasn't interested in. He had offered her a cigarette when he sat down next to her. She declined, but he hadn't missed the flash of interest in her eyes.

Since they had returned from the Koopa Kingdom, Peach seemed to have resolved to pay more attention to his brother. Mario accepted this as his due, but he had apparently not forgotten the look in her eyes when he had tried to kill the koopa king, and he had given up his attempts to court her. Luigi couldn't shake the feeling that the princess was treating Mario like a pet, or perhaps a mascot; she was clearly using him as an excuse to host a series of parties and festivals and sporting events. He didn't know what sort of game she was playing, and he didn't care. It had nothing to do with him.

In the distance far beyond the tennis courts, the strangely shaped hills rose into the sky, the curious indentations in their sides peering

out like hollow eyes. Dinosaurs roamed through those hills, feeding on centipedes as long as city buses. Brightly colored fungi several stories high scattered downy spores that melted when they touched the exposed surfaces of the corroded metal that emerged from the ground like the bones of a terrible skeleton. Underneath their feet labyrinthine systems of pipes and tunnels enclosed strangling vines and shambling monstrosities. Machinery that he could not begin to comprehend hummed and clicked and whirred as it waited in the darkness.

Mario won the match against Daisy with a decisive swing, and he jumped into the air before turning and flashing a peace sign at Luigi. Luigi nodded in acknowledgment and flicked the ash from his cigarette.

Peach clapped her gloved hands together lightly, and all around them a crowd of toads cheered. Although Luigi had started to notice small differences between them, most of the mushroom people had the same face. Each of them had their own personality, and their own interests, and their own little lives, but very few of them acted as true individuals. The politicians and nobles of the princess's court were interchangeable, and even the man named Toadsworth, whom Peach distrusted yet seemed to respect, could have been any of them.

In the center of their bright, blank faces, Mario twirled his racket and taunted Daisy, who made a show of shaking her fist and pouting. Luigi thought she might have lost to Mario on purpose, but he couldn't be sure. People underestimated his brother, but Mario was surprisingly athletic and learned from his mistakes.

As hardheaded as Mario could be sometimes, Luigi enjoyed watching him move through the world, acting as if everything he encountered were his to manipulate as he wished. Mario lived by no one's rules except his own, and at times he seemed almost invincible, like no one could ever hurt him. He was, in a sense, absolutely free.

Mario was a nobody, but Luigi would much rather be like his brother than like Princess Peach, who occupied a high position but was trapped within her role.

Luigi glanced in her direction. A red-shelled koopa had appeared behind her, slipping a piece of paper into her hand as he cleared away her untouched glass of tea. Peach unfolded the note, skimmed her eyes across it, and then destroyed it with a lick of pale flame that did not touch her glove.

Peach's expression remained neutral until she caught Luigi staring at her.

"It appears," she told him, a slow smile spreading across her face, "that tonight I am going to be kidnapped."